

Paving the Road for Telecommuters

The EPA is singing the praises of outfits that are helping to cut cutting pollution by encouraging employees to work from home

NEWS ANALYSIS

By Burt Helm

Here's a notice from the Environmental Protection Agency that won't give Corporate America fits. On Sept. 29, the agency released its first annual 20 Best Workplaces for Commuters, which were selected from the 500 largest U.S. companies. Topping the list: Intel (INTC), which offers van-pooling, fitness centers, and volleyball courts at its Folsom, Calif., headquarters, as well as an extended telecommuting option in certain circumstances. Some 75% of Intel employees take advantage of the plan at one time or another in their careers.

Most of those topping the EPA's list are tech outfits, with Cisco (CSCO), Sun Microsystems (SUNW), Oracle (ORCL), AMD (AMD), and Texas Instruments (TXN) all in the top 10. And rather than simply subsidizing employees' bus passes or coordinating carpools, many outfits are enabling workers to stay at home on a full-time basis. That's long been taboo in corporate circles, but "the culture is changing," says Jim Sinocchi of IBM (IBM), which the survey ranked in 16th place. On any given day, approximately 128,000 IBM employees telecommute, either from a customer site or their homes, says Sinocchi, who adds that the program has trimmed Big Blue's office rentals.

Sun, which came in fifth, is redefining the very idea of what constitutes a normal office with its iWork program. Not only can employees telecommute, they also can bring up their own desktop computer on any PC in any Sun office. iWork technology "automatically gives you a connection to anywhere in the enterprise," says Sun CIO Bill Dass. "You can work [from home] until traffic dies down, drive to Sun, and go back to work."

CHAINED TO THE WHEEL. Of Sun's 36,100 employees, roughly 16,000 on the iWork plan don't have specific offices while another 1,000 work full-time from home. Echoing the sentiment at IBM, Sun says the policy saves on office-space costs, with Dass adding that employees are more productive because they work during what would otherwise be commuting time.

For about five years, third-ranked Cisco Systems has supplied all employees with home broadband. At the office, Cisco also provides on-site services like dry cleaning, a carwash, even dentists, so that employees can take care of chores that would otherwise keep them away from their desks.

The survey is an expansion of a 2001 regional program the EPA began in order to recognize large employers providing commuter benefits like transit subsidies, car-pool programs, and telecommuting options. Small wonder the EPA sees this as a cause worth pushing. According to 2000 U.S. Census data, the number of workers who car-pool declined from 19.7% in 1980 to 12.2% in 2000. While the percentage of people who worked from home has risen slightly, from 2.3% to 3.3%, the average commute in America has increased to 25.5 minutes, from 21.7 minutes in 1980. Three out of four Americans are still the sole occupants of the cars that take them to and from work.

EVERYONE WINS. The EPA hopes its rankings will encourage Corporate America's greater involvement in efforts to cut vehicle exhaust emissions. Companies that get on the EPA list can feature their Best Workplace awards on corporate Web sites and in recruitment literature. "It's a win-win," says Margo Oge, the EPA's director of transportation and air quality. "Many can save money by reducing parking-space costs while they reduce air pollution" and traffic congestion. Intel, EMC (EMC), IBM, Hewlett Packard (HPQ), and Wyeth Pharmaceuticals (WYE) all added commuter benefits to increase their chances of appearing on the list, according to an EPA insider.

In order to make the EPA's top 20, companies generally must offer at least one kind of mass-transit or van-pool subsidy, be involved in a transportation management association, provide a telecommuting option, and make available onsite amenities like a gym. Sixty-nine of the top 500 largest companies in America satisfied the requirements, according to the EPA. It sure beats regulation.